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RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND THEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

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The great inheritance which the intellectual life of this century derives from the last century is the idea of development. It is a commonplace to say that this conception has revolutionized our way of regarding nature, life, and human society. And no one today would approach the study of a type of plant or animal, or a particular human institution, without considering it from the evolutionary standpoint. As Aristotle remarked long ago, the best way to philosophize about the nature of a thing is to study its process of growth. The genetic method has been successfully applied to the study of religions, and the progress of the religious consciousness has been traced from its lowly beginnings in animism and spiritism to its culmination in ethical and spiritual religion. One of the results of this investigation has been to show how essentially a process of development is a feature of a living religion. When a religion becomes stereotyped and mechanized the vital spirit ebbs from it, even though it may linger long as an external institution. So perished the ancient faiths of Greece and Rome, and so must perish any religion which is divorced from the spiritual life and culture of the age. For life means growth and fruitful interaction with the environment; and the living thing has the capacity to select and appropriate elements which nourish its inner being and promote its development.

To those who have entered into this way of thinking the position of theology at the present day gives much ground for reflection. While the other sciences are undergoing a rapid development, it has remained stationary, if not absolutely, yet to a very great extent. Most, if not all, of the churches are burdened with a theology which grew up and assumed form in what may be termed a prescientific age, and the right to modify and reconstruct is by

no means universally recognized. And until this right is fully conceded, the position of an enlightened teacher of the subject must, to say the least, be an awkward and difficult one. The *fons et origo mali* lay in the notion generally accepted in the creed-building ages, and not yet entirely extinct, that it was possible to elaborate a systematic body of religious doctrine which would be the norm of spiritual experience and belief for all time. And conservative sentiment, which interfuses itself with all religious things, acts as a protecting bulwark against the spirit of innovation. To those under the dominion of this feeling it savors of sacrilege to alter and amend the "faith once delivered to the saints."

But the herald signs of change are becoming visible above the horizon. The pressure of modern knowledge is making itself felt even in quarters which have long been inhospitable to new ideas. One of the most interesting and significant features of the religious outlook is the rise of the vigorous Modernist party within the Church of Rome. The Romish church indeed has all along had a theory of development, but it was a theory incompatible with the true idea of organic growth. For its developmental principle was that of accretion, not of transmutation, and the church accepted the idea of an unalterable deposit of faith. Elements which were "performed" there might be further defined, explicated, and elaborated: but real reconstruction was excluded, and what had been taken up into the structure of the Catholic creed could never be discarded. Under such limitations a true reconciliation with modern knowledge was not possible. As Father Tyrrell has said: "A bold contention that all ecclesiastical development is simply a mechanical unpacking of what was given in a tight parcel 2,000 years ago!" To this he opposes Modernism as "an expression of an opposite contention, of a belief in time, in growth, in vital and creative evolution." And one cannot doubt that progress is bound up with the frank and full acknowledgment of this principle.

Although a more liberal spirit has prevailed in the Protestant church, yet the theologians of Protestantism tacitly took over from the pre-Reformation church the idea that it was possible to have a creed universally and always valid. But they believed that creed must be founded on Scripture, as the Word of God, and not on

the tradition and authority of the church. And apparently they assumed there could be no other interpretation of Scripture admissible than their own. Hence they made no provision for development, and changed and enlarged views of the Bible have made the uncritical method in which they elaborated their doctrines unsatisfactory. So the idea of development in theology is just as much a pressing problem for the intelligent Protestant as for the enlightened Catholic.

It will be of advantage to make some observations at this point on the way in which this problem of development has been dealt with by two schools of thought in Germany during the last century. The former drew its inspiration in the main from Hegel, and tended to merge theology in a philosophy of religion. The theory was that theology expounded religious truth in the form of representation or figurative thinking, while the speculative thinker had for his task to purify and elevate this matter and bring it into the form of the philosophic notion. This was the method followed by the Swiss theologian Biedermann, and it was adopted, perhaps in a less whole-hearted way, and with less radical results, by Pfeiderer and Lipsius. So far as this method stands for the right to exercise critical reflection on the dogmas of the church, and for an attempt to bring about greater coherency between the elements of doctrine, the justice of its claim need not be disputed. The objection to it was that in some hands it degenerated into an arbitrary application to historic materials of an assumed higher point of view instead of being a sympathetic criticism and reconstruction from within. It was no doubt his sympathy with the reaction provoked by the extremes of the speculative method which prompted Ritschl to take up and seriously work out the thought of Schleiermacher, that theology must be the living outcome and expression of Christian experience. In other words it should endeavor to give a general and coherent exposition of the principles involved in the Christian consciousness. Hence the Ritschlian attempt to show that doctrines were values, and to build up a theology on judgments of value. The natural affinity of this method with the pragmatic method, about which we hear so much at present, hardly needs to be pointed out. Though one may disagree with a good deal in the

Ritschlian work, it is only fair to say that it was a genuine effort to liberate theology from a dead weight of dogma, and to bring it into a living relation with religious experience. Hence, whatever its shortcomings, Ritschlianism did much to vitalize the study of theology in Germany and in this country.

But certain assumptions are made by writers of this school which deserve to be examined. It is assumed by Harnack, Bousset, and others that, by a study of the records of Christianity, and by following the working of the Christian spirit in history, it is possible to distinguish essential from non-essential elements and to reconstruct a primitive Christian consciousness which is normative. Yet in the selection and valuation of historic materials, in order to make clear what is essential, the critic must bring with him some guiding conceptions, some ideal of what religion ought to be. He cannot pretend that what is called "the essence of Christianity" is explicitly set forth in the biblical literature and distinguished from the non-essential. The historian must bring something of his own with him in forming his judgment, and his own spiritual valuations help to form the ideal by which he judges. For this reason he cannot form an absolute disinterested appreciation of the life of the past; he always sees the past through the spiritual environment in which he is placed. And to reconstruct in all its fulness the religious experience of a distant time when the *Weltanschauung*, to use a convenient phrase, was very different from his own—to reconstruct such an experience with perfect accuracy is beyond his power. It does not follow that what the present-day historian finds to be the essence of Christianity would have expressed the mind of primitive Christians themselves. Ritschlian critics eliminate the eschatological element from the essence of the gospel; but it is hardly to be thought that this was a subordinate matter to the early church. And then, along with this assumed ability to separate clearly essential from non-essential elements, there goes the further assumption that the essential the critics have reached is the proper norm by which to test the historic evolution of the Christian consciousness. With "the true nature of Christianity" to guide them, writers like Harnack and the late Edwin Hatch regard the elaborate theology of the ecclesias-

tical creeds as in the main a *damnosa hereditas*. It is a false accretion due to the irruption of the Greek speculative spirit which overlaid and distorted the genuine Christian consciousness. The beginnings of this process of distortion are discernible, according to Bousset, even in the Pauline theology. Now I am not concerned to maintain that there is not an element of truth in these contentions, nor to deny that arbitrary and accidental materials have intruded themselves into the faith. None the less the view before us suggests a very pessimistic reading of the evolution of theology. Almost from the first theology began to misconceive and pervert, and only after 1,900 years are we beginning to clear away these false additions and to get back to the substratum of truth! The form and the content of religious experience cannot be separated and opposed to one another in so drastic a fashion. Doctrinal constructions which were quite alien to it could not have been forced on the Christian consciousness, and it would hardly have accepted patiently a yoke felt to be oppressive. In fact some measure of elective affinity must have existed, and no doubt there was a process of interaction between the form and the content. One cannot suppose, for example, that the theological construction of Christ as the divine Logos was regarded by the consciousness of the early church as a metaphysical subtlety or a superfluous speculation. It was the formal statement of the value-experience Christ had for the souls of his followers. Of course to say this is very far from saying that the doctrinal statement of the church's faith by the theologians of the fourth and fifth centuries of our era is to be taken as an absolute and final statement. Spiritual experience is not a stereotyped magnitude but a living and growing thing, and for this reason the doctrines which seek to generalize and define it will require to be modified and reconstructed from time to time; the new wine must be put into new bottles. But this is quite consistent with our holding that the body of doctrine developed at a particular stage was at least a relatively suitable expression of the existing religious consciousness. The ancient creeds of the church are felt by our age to be unsatisfactory, not because they were mistaken and perverted constructions from the first, but because the growing spiritual

consciousness has moved beyond them and has ceased to find a full satisfaction in them.

It may be of use, in view of the practical importance of the question, to explain more fully the relation, as we conceive it, of religious doctrine to religious experience. That doctrine (and the formulation of doctrines in a theological system) is a kind of excrescence on the religious life is not a tenable theory. It is not an arbitrary or an accidental product, but has its place and function in the logic of religious development. Every vital religion that reaches a certain stage of growth will expand into doctrines, just as the tree arrives at a point when it puts out branches. In the technical sense doctrine is a comparatively late product of religious development, but it is prepared for in the early stages of religious growth. Theology is always the outcome of reflective thought; yet even in the primitive period man had his instinctive beliefs by which he gave meaning to his religious experiences. Without this rudimentary qualification of feeling by thought no experience could be called religious: prior to the use of language as the medium of ideas religion in the proper sense could not exist. The rise of myths and cosmogonies betokens the further development of this aspect of the religious consciousness; but religion has to pass from the tribal to the national form, from the level of unconscious to conscious development, ere the structure of religious doctrine begins to grow. It is then that, in obedience to the deep-rooted impulse of man's nature to ask for reasons, theology commences its work of thinking out and expounding the meaning of what is done in religion. The cult and its ritual are the oldest part of a developed faith, and they go back, in their rudiments at least, to a primitive period. And the early theologian sets to work to explain the significance of the acts performed in the ritual, and to explicate in doctrines what is done in worship. Around the relatively stable material of the cult doctrines proceed to gather; and afterward of course the task of the theologian assumes a wider scope and meaning when theology comes into contact and interaction with independent aspects of culture like science and philosophy. Inasmuch as religious experience is concentrated around the cultus, theology may be said from its commencement to be an

endeavor to set forth the meaning of religious experience. There is something legitimate and even necessary in this, for man is not only a being who feels and wills; he also desires to know and understand. And if the thinking-function evolves later in the order of time, it is not on that account inferior in the order of value. So theology comes in to answer the demand made by a growing self-consciousness, the demand, namely, that religious experience be generalized and thus become a significant content. Only by means of religious ideas embodied in doctrines can a religion be taught and spread. Only because religion is a thinking of experience as well as a feeling-state can it function as an aspect of the growing life of culture.

Accordingly I am forced to dissent from some things which the late Professor James has said, in his vivid and picturesque way, about religious doctrine in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Admitting the value of what James, followed by Pratt, Delacroix, and others, has to tell us of the function of the subconsciousness in giving a psychological explanation of mysticism and other religious phenomena, it is still, I think, a mistake to treat the feeling-life as the one and essential foundation of religion, while theology is a secondary and not very important superstructure. It is perfectly true that there is more in spiritual experience than can be expressed in doctrine, and we all know that there are depths in the inner life which defy verbal expression. But this does not prove that doctrine is not an essential aspect of any developed religion. And in truth we have only to remember the interaction, already noted, between form and content to see that religious ideas in their turn promote the development of spiritual feeling. For ideas can become the centers and rallying points of emotion, and the more stable sentiments can also gather round them. With much that Professor James says about the practical valuelessness of scholastic theology and the metaphysics of the divine attributes one may agree. But the fact is that we are here dealing with a theology which the spiritual life of the age has outgrown, or is fast outgrowing, and the argument is not relevant against theology in the exercise of its legitimate function of interpreting religious experience.

In offering some further observations on the subject I would urge that a candid acceptance of the principle of development in theology is indispensable, for spiritual experience itself develops. It is sometimes argued that in a religion you have a determinate principle, revealed in a typical experience, which maintains itself unchanged throughout. As I have contended elsewhere, this is to forget that a religion has its being in the consciousness of living minds, and as such it is subject to interaction with the other contents of that consciousness. The scientific knowledge of the age, its ethical ideas, and its practical aspirations are all reflected in individual minds, and the religious spirit cannot remain unaffected by them. To suppose that a specific and typical form of religious experience can maintain an abstract identity with itself from age to age, a changeless aspect of a changing mind, is to assert what has no psychological probability. Experience as life begets subtle alterations of outlook and valuation while the historic process is running its course; and, as Eucken has suggestively remarked, it is never the past as it once was that we re-create, but the past as it is interpreted through the spiritual life of the present. However anxious we might be to do so, we are unable to pass beyond our spiritual environment and reproduce in ourselves the very form and pressure of the spiritual experience of Christians in the first century. In an article in the *Hibbert Journal* (April, 1908, p. 491) Dr. Forsyth confidently puts the question: "If we may not rest on the mere dictum of an apostle, may we not rest upon our own repetition of the apostolic experiences, the experience which made the apostles?" Now if this only means that the history of Christianity reveals a continuous spiritual experience which connects itself with the person and work of Christ, few unprejudiced minds will be found to dispute the statement. But if, as seems more likely, the words are meant to convey the idea that an experience of Christ, say that of St. Paul, repeats itself in identical form from age to age, then there are difficulties in such a theory. For individual experience must always be psychologically and socially conditioned, and no exact repetition of past experience seems possible. If a single and specific type of experience, reproducing itself from generation to generation, lay behind the development of

Christianity, it is hard to see why there should be those great changes in spiritual and ethical ideals which the history of the church discloses. At the very least one must suppose that the experience was obscured, distorted, and modified by other influences which militated against its full and clear expression. And this is practically to admit that the typical experience is qualified in its working by interaction with other elements.

It may be said that the line of argument we have been developing appears to sacrifice any principle of identity in religious experience, and that it would follow that the Christian consciousness today is only the same in name with that of the first Christians. In reply it may be said that there is an identity, but it is not that of a hard and fast type but of a living process of growth which is continuous throughout. For the gift of Christ was a spiritual life, a seed of promise sown in the hearts of men and by fruitful interaction taking fresh form and expression from age to age. It is not the weakness, it is the strength of the Christian spirit at once to enrich and to be enriched by other elements in the expanding life of man. And it maintains through all its movement the unity of spirit and purpose which preserves its continuity.

Now this developmental character of spiritual life requires a corresponding development on the side of its theological expression. But this truth is often obscured by the fact that men are not fully aware how essentially growing is religious experience, and they do not realize the movement in which they are involved because change is gradual and proceeds without observation. Though we may not fully recognize it, our religious consciousness is none the less affected by the knowledge and ethical culture of the age, and receives color and meaning from them. Hence the impossibility of simply going back to the past and trying to reproduce its spirit and outlook. The spiritual life of the present, for example, would forbid the primitive Christian eschatology, and even Calvinistic predestinarianism cannot now enter into the vital substance of the faith.

But with the full acceptance of the principle that spiritual experience is not a stereotyped form but a developing process, development in its doctrinal expression becomes a necessity. And

the theological distress and unrest of our time are, in part at least, due to the fact that conservative sentiment and institutional interests strive to maintain the validity of theological forms which have become too narrow for the content of the spiritual life. It may be granted that the work of reconstruction will bring with it many serious problems and perplexities, and the old method of elaborating dogmas out of texts of Scripture, read uncritically, is no longer available. In some departments of his task the theologian will have to cultivate closer relations with the philosopher whose office is "to think things together." In other matters the need of greater simplicity and reserve will be apparent. Yet, whatever the difficulties, the duty of theological development cannot be postponed indefinitely; it ought rather to be courageously faced in the interests of vital and practical religion.